

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Characters in Goethe

## Mephistopheles (unconscientious)

**Character** Mephistopheles is a demon in Germanic folklore, and appears associated with the figure of Dr. Faustus in the 16th century *Faust* chapbook. This demon typically serves as a vehicle for bad actors who have already in some sense 'lost their souls'; as the supreme negative force, into a 'literary character' in Goethe's *Faust*. Mephistopheles introduces Faust to a wide range of unpredictable and harmful actions. Questioned on his identity, Mephistopheles will only say—as Milton essentially said in *Paradise Lost*—that 'I am part of that force which would do ever evil, and does ever good.' He clarifies this: 'I am the spirit which eternally denies,' for all that has been created deserves to be uncreated. Is Mephistopheles a 'character' or a 'spirit'?

**Pragmatic** Mephisto shows Faust how vain traditional academic learning is, thus mocks Faust's own life way, Mephisto dons Faust's academic garb, and pretends to interview incoming students in Faust's University. After ridiculing the studies of logic and metaphysics—central topics of mediaeval education—Mephistopheles turns to a young candidate with a disturbing summary of higher education: 'gray, dear young fellow, is all theorizing, and green, life's golden tree.' Metaphysics, a staple of mediaeval training, comes in for a particular drubbing from Mephistopheles. He lards with deep irony his advice to the student of metaphysics. The real knowledge, of the senses and practical intellect, are what Mephistopheles has to offer.

**Destructive** As Faust and Margarete grow in love for one another—she a naïve, he old enough to know better—Mephistopheles delights in ridiculing their passion. 'Just as a freshet floods its banks when swelled by thaw, you poured into her heart the raging current, and now your brook is shallow as before.' He is in a sense the downdrag in all human enterprise, and as such he functions in Goethe's play. He is the negative of all that is plan and desire, and he is cynical about human institutions and desires.

**Merciless** The devil has no mercy on those who make a pact with him and then complain at the consequences. He recalls that those who fall for his traps are already fallen, and have only borrowed him to provide mobility and function to their desires. Mephistopheles is well placed to enjoy the fatal breakdown of Faust's desires. He delights in knowing that no lasting happiness could accrue to Faust and Gretchen as lovers, and in fact that his most ambitious spoiler schemes will bear fruit. Gretchen will poison her mother and get pregnant; Gretchen's brother will defend her honor but be killed by Faust and Mephistopheles; Gretchen will kill her illegitimate child.

**Parallels** Mephistopheles springs from mediaeval German demonology, and is widely known in the Renaissance for his diabolic magic; as such he wreaks havoc in Marlowe's **Doctor Faustus** (1616). Milton's **Paradise Lost** (1676) gives classic expression to the principle of evil in his Satan/Lucifer, the angel rebelling against God; a concentrated form of evil targeted in Saint John's **Book of Revelation** (last third of first century A.D.) Klaus Mann, son of Thomas Mann, took up the Mephisto theme in the novel of that name (1956), in which an ambitious citizen of Nazi Germany sells his soul for political favors.

### Discussion questions

Mephisto is the spirit who denies, but does he not in fact also proffer delightful things and events, as though he were a source of things mortals love? Doesn't Mephisto need to offer real pleasures in order to invade human souls?

Does Mephisto have a sense of play? How does he show it? (Bring specific passages to bear on your reply.) Has he a vicious and destructive attitude toward Faust? Or is he himself a bon vivant, enjoying life in his fashion, and (somewhat) enjoying the same pleasures as Faust?

Faust is a restless searcher for knowledge, as the play begins. He is a mediaeval scholar. Does his restless questing spirit generate an anti-force, Mephisto, simply from its intensity? Is Mephisto a psychological projection of Faust? Has Mephisto anything in common with Satan or the Devil, with their foundations in Christianity and Judaism? Or is he truly just a demon?

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